

The Early Political Career of Abraham Lincoln

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Although Lincoln is most well known for his actions as president during the Civil War, it is also important to know something about his roots and his early experiences in politics.

Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in Larue County, Kentucky to Thomas and Nancy Lincoln. Although Lincoln was mainly self taught, he had about 18 months of formal education. In 1831, Lincoln left his family's newly established homestead in Coles County, Illinois and settled in New Salem, Illinois. His early political career began soon after in 1832.

That year, Lincoln announced he was running for the general assembly in New Salem. On March 9, 1832, he published a circular outlining his views and principles. At the age of 23, it was less than eloquent. Referring to the circular, Barton states that "The remarkable fact is, not that his letter announcing his candidacy was a crude performance, but that it was not far more crude." Soon after this announcement, the Black Hawk War began. Instead of campaigning, Lincoln joined the militia and was elected as captain. Lincoln served for a few months but never saw action. Shortly before the election, the war ended and Lincoln returned and began campaigning. With little time to campaign, he was unable to raise an adequate number of votes. Even though he lost the election, he was awarded the position of postmaster of New Salem. He graciously accepted and earned the nickname Honest Abe for his behavior.

Lincoln ran for election again in 1834. Even though he was in a Democratic county, Lincoln firmly committed himself to a Whig platform. That fact that he won speaks to his character. During his time in office, he dedicated himself to national improvement through transportation and trade. When his term ended, Lincoln ran for reelection in 1836. During his campaign, Lincoln demonstrated his abilities through multiple speeches and gained the support of both Democrats and Whigs. Once again, Lincoln won a position in the legislature and served two more years without incident. About that time, Lincoln created successful law partnerships in Springfield with John Stuart, Stephen Logan, and William Herndon. After his last term in the legislature, Lincoln remained active in politics and was eventually elected to congress. During his time there, he condemned the Mexican American War. This outraged many. With a new family, Lincoln thought about focusing on his law career but was still unsure. With the urging of his friends, he retired from politics, hoping to avoid further damage.

Lincoln left his successful law practice and returned to politics with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This new act helped promote slavery by nullifying the Missouri Compromise by allowing new states to choose whether they would be slave states or not. Until this point, Lincoln had avoided openly discussing his views on slavery. In his campaign for senator, Lincoln best illustrated his beliefs during the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858. During the debates, Lincoln stated that he believed that, although slaves may not be . . . equal in moral or intellectual endowment . . . in the right to eat bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.” Through this and other statements, Lincoln made public his beliefs that slaves should

have equal rights. Although Douglas won the election for senator, Lincoln became the figurehead for the new Republican Party. He was also poised to become the Republican candidate for president.

These early political occurrences did not elevate Lincoln in the minds of the people because of sweeping reforms or policies. Lincoln did not usher in far-reaching reforms until later in his career. He won followers in both political parties because of his eloquent speeches and honorable character. They felt he was “the candidate of pride, wealth, and aristocratic family distinction.” His time in the legislature provided Lincoln great political experience and put him in a position to become the Republican presidential candidate. He would need this experience when he eventually won the presidency as well as when he confronted the conflicts that emerged during his time in office. [From William Barton, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*; R. D. Monroe, “Debating Douglas on the National Stage, 1857-1858” <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/biography7.html>>. (Oct. 14, 2008); “President Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865” <<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h837.html>>. (Oct. 15, 2008); Charles Stanley, “Setting the Scene: A look behind the Lincoln and Douglas Debates” <<http://mywebtimes.com/archives/ottawa/display.php?id=365197>>. (Oct. 14, 2008); and Johnson Washington, “Early Political Career” <<http://www.presidentprofiles.com/Washington-Johnson/Abraham-Lincoln-Early-political-career.html>>. (Oct. 15, 2008).]